Examining the Nature of Authenticity in Mexican Food Culture

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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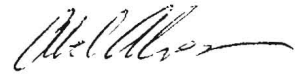

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Abstract

The idea of authenticity is an important consideration when examining and preparing food specific to a culture, but also a concept that has many facets and cannot always be objectively defined. This thesis examines multiple elements of food culture in Mexico, including generational differences, Spanish influence on indigenous cuisine, the view of the culture by outsiders, and the social role of women in and out of the kitchen, and brings these aspects into a discussion of some contributing factors to authenticity.

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Examining the Nature of Authenticity in Mexican Food Culture

The idea of authenticity within the Mexican and Mexican-American communities, as in the case of many ethnic and social groups, is part of an ongoing struggle in which both "outsiders" and those of Mexican heritage are engaged, and perhaps, in the end, cannot be concretely defined. Modern "authentic" Mexican food combines elements of Aztec and Spanish culture, and some of the latter are considered essential to the authentic idea despite the fact that they are actually foreign elements. However, authenticity is an idea that cannot be defined simply by ingredients, but contains elements from social culture, community, history and other things that are not so easily labeled.

The word "authentic" can mean one of two things – first, referring to the chef, that he or she has some inherent authority in what he/she is doing, which seems to apply more to cultural knowledge than professional training, although the latter can certainly play a part as well. Second, referring to the food or cuisine itself, it can mean "genuine as opposed to imagined", suggesting that the food is prepared according to an existing cultural pattern. It is the cultural pattern that creates a potential problem here, since it's generally inferred that one must be a part of that culture to truly understand the pattern.

"Authentic" can be a tricky term, since one's judgments of a culturally loaded food often extend into judgments of the chef or the entire group, so having rigid definitions of authenticity can essentialize an ethnic group[1], restricting them to

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[1] *Essentialize: to express or formulate in essential form; reduce to essentials.* Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2011. In a social context, this usually means to reduce a group of people to the most

certain views of what can and cannot be "real". This can happen both with outsiders' skewed ideas of authenticity and insiders' commitment to tradition.

The debate over authenticity is not a new one; in the late 19th to early 20th century, a fierce debate emerged in Mexico between those who wanted to preserve traditional corn tortillas and those who supported a switch to wheat flour. Historically, maize began as a sacred food in Mexico; Aztec creation stories, as in the case of many Mesoamerican creation stories, described the first people as being made of maize dough, and the plant was given human qualities. Cooks were not allowed to spill any grain on the floor, or it was assumed that the grains would complain to their god and the next harvest would be scant as punishment; another common practice was to blow on the maize before cooking it, to comfort any fear the grain might have about being cooked and consumed.

In 1899, senator Francisco Bulnes kick-started the debate by drawing moral parallels between the grain a person ate and his/her value in society; wheat, he claimed, was the only "truly progressive" grain in regards to nutrition, and anyone who refused to eat wheat must, by assumption, be uncivilized and anti-progress. As an attempt to insert Spanish culture into the lives of the natives, his movement only partially succeeded. This became known as the "tortilla discourse".

After Bulnes released a book, *El porvinir des nacionses Hispano-Americanas* (The Future of the Spanish-American Nations), his dubious brand of nutritional science became the main reference on the subject for Mexican leaders. Because of many indigenous peoples' reluctance or outright refusal to switch their main grain

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common or essential commonly perceived traits about that group, as examined in Lawrence A. Hirschfeld's article "Natural Assumptions: Race, Essence and Taxonomies of Human Kinds".

from corn to wheat, they were cast as the main obstacles to Mexican development; it was believed that the perceived lack of progress from the *campesinos*, or working class, was due to poor nutrition from eating corn, and that by clinging to their traditional foods they were resisting – and hindering – the country's progress. Bulnes' reasoning echoed the sentiments of Social Darwinism, suggesting some inherent inferiority in the *campesinos'* preference for their traditional foods; however, since it placed the blame primarily on the food, it appeared less obviously racist and imperialist than some forms of the philosophy.

Much later, when nutritionists examined Bulnes' data in the 1940s, it was discovered that there was virtually no nutritional difference between wheat and corn, and that the claim was being used to cover up the real causes of social inequalities. Any malnutrition found among the *campesinos* was not due to the quality of the grain, but lack of access to a well-balanced diet. For that matter, the perceived laziness of the working class was often a result of an inability to immediately adjust to the abrupt change in lifestyle brought on by industrialization. This was read and interpreted by some – namely, the privileged elite – as a biological inferiority, and it was suggested that the government encourage indigenous peoples to marry Europeans and therefore "improve" their lineage. Encouraging this was also a way to satisfy the elite in the country, who, while they recognized at least some worth in Mexican natives as permanent members of the country, they felt that the only sure way to redemption for them was to marry Europeans.

Bulnes suggested that wheat was closest in protein value to milk than any other grain, declaring that "milk is the wheat of children, and wheat is the milk of adults" (Bulnes quoted in Pilcher, p.82), and maintained that the number of tortillas one would have to consume to fulfill his daily requirements of protein would be beyond the capacity of the human stomach to digest. He also attacked other aspects of the native diet, suggesting that their almost exclusively vegetarian diet led to debilitation of the brain, and maintained that the reason such a great civilization fell to a smaller group of conquistadors was their inferior diet. As the attempts to wean the natives off wheat grew more widespread, poorhouses and prisons were required to base their menus around wheat bread, and a doctor named Samuel Morales Pereira even decried corn dependence as unsanitary. Missionaries also encouraged the natives to eat wheat, citing that it was the diet of the Spanish, and they had grown "strong and pure and wise..." (Sahagún quoted in Piclehr, p.35), suggesting by inference that this diet of wheat would instill the same qualities in whoever ate it.

The general assertion was that culture was more important than race in one's place in society, but the culture that the government was concerned with was their own; eating and dressing like a European was preferable to eating and dressing like a native. However, most natives had no desire to do so, and therein lay the prime conflict. At the same time, those in power ignored the importance of corn to working-class citizens, both culturally and as a basic necessity for their food; not enough wheat was produced to sustain the entire population by itself. The middle class tended to fall somewhere between the government and the working class; they

believed in the superiority of wheat, but did not decry corn as loudly as the upper class, believing tortillas to be an acceptable, but second-class, addition to the table.[2]

One writer who both respected corn as a nutritional and cultural staple and recognized the larger problem was Andrés Molina Enrìquez, a nationalist. He recognized that maize represented, perhaps more than anything else, the national cuisine, and that even the poorest people had subsisted using maize as a staple for as long as farming had existed. He also pointed out that if nutritional problems existed, it was because insufficient land was distributed to those people, making it impossible to grow all of the food they needed.

The attempt to "rehabilitate" the food culture continued in the 1930s with a program that provided school meals to children; not only did these programs focus on wheat flour for their food - most likely in an attempt to accustom the children to wheat at a young age - they taught the Mexican women they employed to use modern cooking techniques and the men to cultivate wheat instead of corn. Although the *campesinos* often resisted this movement, by 1940, 45% of Mexicans reported at least occasional consumption of wheat bread, increasing to 55% in the next decade.

Around this time, however, the nutritional value of the traditional Mexican diet was re-examined, and it was discovered that maize and beans together supplemented each other in amino acids, creating a complete protein that would not

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[2] Class and economic issues have been tied to food culture even since pre-Columbian days. Aztec nobles and royalty were the only ones who were allowed access to the sacred cacao plant and, by association, the only ones who could have that direct connection to the god Quetzalcoatl. (cont'd) Nobles also ate considerably more meat than peasants, and consequently stood an average of 10 cm taller. In addition, tribes judged one another by stories, real or imagined, of what odd food-related customs those tribes had. (The Otomi tribe picked corn before it was ripe; the Toluca tribe did not use chilies in their food; the Tarascans ate leftovers.)

be available in either food by itself. It was noted that "diets of tortillas, beans and chiles may be much more satisfactory than has hitherto been believed" (Robinson quoted in Pilcher p.95), and the focus shifted from replacing maize to merely supplementing it and providing a wider nutritional variety of foods.

The ultimate result of this movement was a merging of European and indigenous foods as Spanish culture dominated; it was seen as the accepted cultural pattern[3]. Livestock tended to take hold more than crops, perhaps because livestock adapted more easily to a new climate, while new crops might or might not flourish or sprout at all in the wrong soil conditions. People and programs did spring up that tried to merge cultures while still recognizing native contributions, such as the philosophy of Manuel Gamio, who worked to restore pre-Columbian monuments at Teotuhuacán. This merging can be seen in the case of *torta compuesta*, a sandwich popular as a street food. The sandwich itself is made from bread with wheat flour, but includes beans, avocado and chilies, all indigenous elements. *Torta compuesta* is the most popular use of bread in modern Mexican street food, but has been in existence since at least the early 20th century. Wheat-flour tortillas also have fallen into popular use as a form of compromise.

Other popular – and culturally important – Mexican dishes also have elements that place them into categories of "more Mexican" and "more Spanish", and

[3] Food from northern Mexican territories tend to contain more wheat products today, but those regions were more permanently affected by the attempted switch because the soil there was well-suited to growing it, not necessarily for any political reasons.

this categorization can change easily given the variety of ways to prepare them[4]; *mole poblano,* a national dish often served at celebrations, is one example[5]. The name refers to the chili-chocolate sauce that smothers it – chocolate and chilies both being indigenous elements – but the dish itself can be made with either chicken, which is European, or turkey, which originated in the New World. Using different varieties of chilies can also signify the region where the *mole* is made, depending on what chilies and other spices are available and popular in the area.

When it comes to the question of authenticity, the idea of regional variations in a dish ties into one major contributing factor - the right to creativity. How far can the chef deviate from the standard or traditional fare and still be considered authentic, and how important is the intent of the chef in the authenticity of the final product? One restaurant owner, Sara, is of Mexican heritage but combines those cooking traditions with Mediterranean and Asian ingredients. She does not claim to be authentic, but still places a great deal of value on Mexican culinary culture as she cooks. Similarly, the owner of GG's Bakery in El Paso bills her baked goods as "Mexican style" bread because she wants to allow for her own personal touches in the making of the bread, but still draw in customers by advertising as "Mexican". The other products she sells, *menudo* (beef tripe stew) and *tamales*, are more

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[4] Some Mexican individuals have faced an additional problem when deciding whether to lean "more Mexican" or "more Spanish"; identifying their food and themselves as "more Spanish" allows them to gain a slightly higher status, but in the process they can betray or even shun others of their heritage.

[5] Other national dishes gained that status because most outsiders found them disgusting, such as *menudo*. The fact that those within the culture were seemingly the only ones who could stomach the dish became a source of national and cultural pride.

traditional and based on family recipes. Again, she does not claim complete authenticity.

Meredith D. Abarca, of the University of El Paso, held a series of what are known as *charlas culinarias* – "culinary chats" – with several Mexican women with the purpose of making voices heard that would not normally be noticed in an academic setting. Hearing from them in this way prevents the erasure of a group that is typically not heard in the political or economic world, and reinforces their worth as sources of knowledge. These women did not necessarily speak to the authenticity of their own cooking; one woman, Alma Contreras, has developed her own individual style of making *enchiladas* and acknowledges that other women in her social circle do not see them as real *enchiladas.* She retains the right to creative expression even if it means that particular dish of hers is considered inauthentic within her cultural group.

The generation gap and advent of technology are another factor under debate; are older techniques necessarily better or more valid? A poem by Barbara Brinson Curiel, entitled "Recipe: Chorizo con Huevos Made in the Microwave," explores this issue:

"I won't lie,
It's not the same.

When you taste it
memories of abuelita

feeding wood into the stove

will dim.

You won't smell the black crisp

of tortillas

bubbling on cast iron.

Mircrowaved,

they are pale and limp as avena –

haven't a shadow of smoke..."

The poem goes on to weigh the convenience of the microwaved dish against the connections the original dish had to the narrator's grandmother, and the disapproval she imagines from the same as she eats it, comparing the situation to her mother's reaction when she turned down *sopa de fideo* in favor of peanut butter and jelly.

Another illustrator of the generational culture clash within Mexican cooking is the play *The Fat Free Chicana and the Snow Cap Queen*, which explores the relationships within a family-owned restaurant. The daughter of the family wants to modernize the restaurant by improving the nutritional content of the dishes, eliminating lard as an ingredient, but her mother takes this suggestion as an insult

to her cooking and her heritage.[6] She feels that the way she cooks is integral to her personal identity, both as a chef and as a woman.

One argument is that preparing food using older, more primitive methods gives the final product more value because of the effort required to produce it; that using labor-saving devices removes some of the charm from the process. The use of older methods lends a romantic air to the cooking, for some. On the other hand, restricting the definition of authentic chefs to those who stick to traditional methods stifles the creativity of younger generations who might want to add their own touches or take advantage of the technology they have on hand. In some cases, of course, older generations are willing to work with the changes made by younger ones. Rebecca Aguirre of GG's Bakery in El Paso, Texas uses her mother-in-law's tamale recipe, but strains the chile sauce before serving it so it does not retain the skins of the chiles and has a more uniform texture. When her mother-in-law questioned her about this practice, she explained it, and now the mother-in-law uses the same process.

The *metate*, or hand grinder for corn, was one contender in the old vs. new debate when mechanical grinders and tortilla machines started to become more popular, particularly among urban women; they replaced the traditional work done by women to contribute to the end food product, but there were many that found the convenience of mechanization outweighed the potential negative consequences. Both sides have their points; the amount of work women typically did to prepare

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[6] This idea of lard as an essential part of true or authentic Mexican cooking is an interesting one, since lard and pork fat are actually elements that were introduced by the Spanish settlers.

food could amount to five or six hours a day if all the work was done by hand, particularly since neither *masa* dough nor cooked tortillas were designed to last more than a day without preservatives or refrigeration. The question was, and still is, whether labor-saving devices merely make the cooking process easier, or remove some of the "personal touch" in doing so. And, is the former worth the latter?

Mechanization of the tortilla-making process was not without its additional consequences. Early mills decreased the quality of the meal itself by grinding it too coarsely[7], and early tortilla presses were unable to produce the right consistency in the tortilla; it took nearly two decades for an effective press to hit the market. What's more, the use of machines justified the entrance of men into what was traditionally an exclusively female process; women who bought corn mills and tortilla presses, while saving themselves labor and time, were also unwittingly contributing to a decrease in their financial independence.

At first, women were able to assert their superiority over the machines by producing tortillas of better quality than those sold by factories, but as it became possible to mass-produce tortillas of reasonable quality, it became more convenient for many women to buy their tortillas or cornmeal in a store or from a factory, rather than making them by hand. While this saved them hours of preparation on any given day, it also robbed them of much of their identity; women were often defined by their skill or a particular technique for making tortillas, and their emotional role as food provider was greatly diminished.

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[7] Some preparation methods also degraded the nutritional qualities; the original process, called *nixtamal*, involved soaking the grains with lime before cooking them. This allowed vital nutrients to be retained, something that the dry grinding process failed to do.

Women are and have been crucial in the development of Mexican food culture, since traditionally they are the ones with power in the kitchen; even in pre-Columbian times, the value of a woman as a potential wife was judged by her cooking skills. Eventually, even as store-bought tortillas became more popular, some took advantage of that convenience and used their newly acquired spare time to focus on ways to earn outside income. Today, many women run their own food businesses and therefore find a way to gain personal power from their skills while still maintaining their roles as nurturers. Sometimes this results from insufficient income within the family or simply a desire to extend cooking skills beyond the private kitchen. In addition, the social networks of women also contribute to the efficient running of a business or group regardless of whether any of those women involved are actually in charge.

The idea of the Mexican *cocina publica* – public kitchen – revolves around the psychology of eating, in which food is not eaten solely for nutrition, but for pleasure as well. The word *cocina* has three different meanings in Spanish. First is the act of cooking, transforming raw ingredients into something culturally significant, building on knowledge and experience. Second is the kitchen, an important shared space within the community. The third definition is harder to translate but means something along the lines of "cuisine", a food system that is defined by cultural boundaries and traditions. All three of these meanings are generally embodied in the *cocina publica.*

These kitchens are different from professional restaurants in that they are usually family businesses - often run or supervised by women – in which family

recipes are used as signature dishes. Such businesses generally place customer satisfaction and social benefits over net profit. Food carts and street vendors are a prime example of these sorts of public kitchens; these carts provide meals on the go for low-income workers while also providing employment for disabled or unskilled workers themselves. They generally operate without permits, but are allowed to continue doing so because they fill an important niche; 72% of the population in Mexico bought food on street carts in 2006 that they could not have afforded otherwise. Often, the customers of these establishments are included in the family atmosphere of the place; regular customers, or those who cannot afford meals, are given food for free, and the stands or restaurants double as public spaces such as meeting halls, or daycares for employees and customers alike.

GG's Bakery in El Paso is a perfect example of this type of public kitchen. Although the face on their sign is that of their male baker, Manuel, the business is run by the founder, Guillermina Gándara, and sisters Pilar Coral and Rebecca Aguirre, all of whom contribute to the cooking. Gándara chose to start a bakery rather than a restaurant because it requires less overhead to operate and therefore can survive on less profit; the social benefits such as the connection to her baker father's heritage are more important to her than capital gain. Family obligations are generally seen as more important than work; Aguirre has learned Manuel's bread recipes so she can easily step in when he needs to miss work. In addition, Gándara always gives away free samples of new products, or those whose recipes have changed, both to gain an understanding of her customers' tastes and keep them coming back.

During busy times such as holiday seasons, the owners bring other women into GG's Bakery to help prepare the unusually large number of tamales ordered, sometimes working through the night. However, this is a social occasion as much as a business event; the women exchanged stories and advice about their lives, politics and television. Aguirre, Coral and Gándara deliberately hire only women for this purpose because "tamale-making [is seen] as a woman-centered, role-affirming communal ritual that empowers women as the carriers of tradition" (Abarca 197). The employees have their moments of community while making the tamales; their customers have their moments while eating them.

Restaurants under Mexican ownership often put forth a dual persona. On the one hand, customers of Hispanic descent have more accurate ideas of what to expect from traditional cooking, and this is what they expect to receive when they order. On the other hand, outsiders have a different view of what "real" Mexican food should be, and they are presented with this pseudo-reality for two purposes. The first, obviously, is to keep the customers happy and returning for more; the second is often to prevent outsiders from gleaning true secrets of Mexican cooking and potentially appropriating those secrets as their own. The cooks deliberately create distance between themselves and their "outsider" customers, both to protect what they see as the sanctity of their cooking and because they sometimes resent those who have the financial means to travel and/or eat out, but are permitted to have an ignorance of the cultural knowledge of places they visit.

This brings up the question of popular authenticity versus "real" authenticity; what the public sees as authentic as opposed to what people of Mexican heritage see

as authentic. Menus of Mexican restaurants are often dictated, at least to some extent, by what outsiders feel they should be served. Restaurant owner Enrique initially refused to serve tortilla chips as a pre-meal snack, but when customers began requesting the chips, he served them as "*totopos*", which in his mind was closer to the actual tradition of eating fried tortillas. Similarly, another restaurateur refuses to call dishes by familiar but inaccurate names; "quesadillas" are called such only if they are served on corn tortillas. A similar dish served on a flour tortilla is called a *sincronizada*; the owner wants to prevent his customers from perpetuating incorrect terms, but his refusal to pander to popular ideas led one reviewer to criticize his restaurant for its lack of "Mexican charm".

One question that arises from this situation is a chicken vs. egg type of question: if white Americans and other outsiders are served falsely authentic food in a Mexican restaurant, on whose terms does this happen? Is it the decision of the restaurant to keep non-Mexicans distant, or the restaurant's forced decision because that is what customers demand? In situations where the latter is the case, could the idea of deliberate distance be something that the owners claim as their purpose to ease a feeling of "selling out"? The two, of course, need not be mutually exclusive, but there is a question of free will there.

Claiming our ideas of authenticity exclusively from such businesses – that is, our ideas and nothing else – is another source of potential issues, since it boxes other cultures into boundaries that are deliberately different from our own. It forces people of other cultures to be different on our terms, not theirs, and freezes them into firm definitions that often do not allow for financial mobility. The popular

view of Mexican food as cheap supports this idea; other cuisines, such as French, are foods for which we expect to pay high prices, implying that the quality or cultural worth is somehow higher. As an example of this effect, the indigenous food *cuitlacoche*, a corn fungus, was long considered by the elite and trendy, even within Mexico, to be disgusting and unfit to eat; it was not until the gourmet Jaime Saldívar concocted a dish of the fungus wrapped in a French crepe and covered in *béchamel* sauce that *cuitlacoche* came to be seen as acceptable and even a delicacy. Other ancient dishes that had fallen out of style came back into vogue quickly following the return of *cuitlacoche*.[8]

A potential problem emerges when individuals that have no Mexican heritage – outsiders – obtain status as authorities on Mexican food. This is the case with Diana Kennedy, whose problematic nature I'll explore in more detail later. Stemming from this potential issue, however, is a greater one – the disparity between the American population's attitude toward Mexican food and culture, or at least its idea of what that should be, and our attitude toward people of Mexican heritage. Southern California has fashioned large amounts of architecture and entertainment around their Spanish past while segregating its citizens who speak primarily Spanish. Similarly, during the Depression, public officials and popular opinion turned so violently against Mexicans that a third of the Mexican population was rounded up or forced out of the United States; meanwhile, middle-class families were bringing food and furnishings into their homes that were inspired by Mexico.

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[8] The adaptation of foods to make them more appealing also happened in reverse; the 1868 edition of *El cocinero mexicano* – "The Mexican Chef" – presented recipes for popular European dishes amongst the traditional and native dishes, but only after the recipes had been altered to appeal more to Mexican tastes.

A similar problem was seen in New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina; a collection of taco trucks that had become popular during the rebuilding, when many Mexican and other Central American immigrants came to the city, found themselves under fire from both the health and immigration departments, despite an absence of customer complaints and the fact that the majority of truck owners were fully legal workers.

By accepting Mexican food, our culture gives the false impression of an absence of xenophobia, when in reality Mexican immigrants, or even those who have been in the country for generations, are demonized as the "other". Vicki Ruiz quotes Christine Yano on this difference: "Eating another social group's food does not mean that one possesses particular knowledge or appreciation of their culture, fraternizes with them, or supports their political or economic positions" (Ruiz 6). As an example, a man named Ryan Lambert recently created a brand of salsa he called Minuteman Salsa, in reaction to the 2006 immigration marches. As part of his reasoning for doing so, he puts forth the assertion that buying Mexican-made salsa was "against [American] values", and donates a quarter of his profits to the Minuteman Project, an anti-immigration group. Another, less specific example occurred in the 1930s with the increasing popularity of chili con carne, a highly Americanized dish which retains a few Mexican elements, while the original chili stands in San Diego were shut down in a struggle with supposed health hazards. Acceptance of food from other cultures is a step in the right direction – until recently, Mexican food was not even seen by Americans as fit for consumption – but it cannot be the end of the line.

The intersection of these two ideas is when cultural appropriation becomes a problem, when the dominant culture takes those aspects of a marginalized culture that it finds desirable or acceptable (such as food) and attempts to make them its own, erasing those who originally created them. In food, this takes place when the creator of a dish "acquire[s] a claim of authenticity undermining the intellectual knowledge and creative expression of an earlier source" (Abarca 4). This process effectively erases the stories and knowledge of the many people who have previously made that dish.

Copyrighting of recipes can create this problem, as our culture and laws in the United States do not consider such things intellectual property until they are written down in some sort of permanent form. Since many recipes within Mexican culture are passed down within families and never written down, an outsider who learns a recipe and then prints it automatically gains more implied ownership simply for writing it down; this devalues the importance of privately shared recipes and the community that produces them.[9]

It must be noted that globalization and culinary tourism are not all bad; there are those who are willing to enjoy and/or prepare the cuisine of another culture without claiming any authority in doing so and while retaining a respect for the source. For those who are willing to experience it, genuine immersion in a food culture allows a better understanding of the culture at large and its values.

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[9] While cookbooks were published by affluent Mexican women in the 1800s, often the hired women who prepared the recipes from those books would use their own personal style and preferences, ignoring parts of the recipe entirely.

The question then emerges: what is required for someone to cook and/or serve food integral to a culture and have it be considered acceptable? For that matter, does a strict food culture serve more to bring that group together or heighten the sense of the "other"?

As an example of the questions that can emerge, I'll examine the relative backgrounds of three women who are experienced in Mexican cooking. The first is Diana Kennedy, who, while she is English by birth, is widely considered an excellent authority on Mexican cooking based on the recipes she has released and the extensive research she has done in the country. However, these recipes were based on food served to her by the maids she employed during her trips to Mexico, about whom the reader is given little or no information besides their first names. While Kennedy is undeniably more knowledgeable than many about Mexico as a country, the fact remains that while in a position of privilege, she took the recipes cultivated by these maids and claimed them as her own, as both published works and in her position as a teacher of Mexican cooking.

Kennedy, as she is especially well-known in these circles and sometimes called the Julia Child of Mexican cooking, demands a closer look. Obviously, even though her authority is problematic, not everyone even within Mexico has the same opinion of her. The Mexican government awarded her the Order of the Aztec Eagle for her work in spreading awareness of their food culture, although it should be noted that, since this award is reserved for foreigners, this does not *necessarily* speak of her authority in comparison to those of Mexican heritage. To be fair, she takes great care in the preparation of her food, believing it a cardinal sin to own

such devices as the garlic press, and puts great value on methods of hand preparation rather than mechanical aids. She also covers elements of culture in her books that most Americans and English would not find appealing; her latest recipe volume includes foods such as wasp nest sauce and iguana tamales, exposing aspects of Mexican food culture that are not generally in the public eye outside of that country.

As evidenced by the prefaces in her cookbooks, in which she describes in detail the utensils and ingredients she mentions in her recipes, Kennedy is extremely familiar with the foods and tools of Mexican culture. However, although she goes into great detail about how to tell if a certain fruit is ready, where the best markets are, and geographical variants in produce, she mentions nothing about the Mexican people, even on subjects such as cheese that require human effort to produce. Since her initial interest in Mexican cooking was thanks to her maids, one might think she would acknowledge the roles of the people that produce her ingredients, or perhaps those from whom she learned how to tell quality or ripeness, as an example.

To compare with Kennedy, the second woman in question is Cristina Potter, administrator of the food blog "Mexico Cooks!" Although born in America, she has lived for nearly thirty years in Mexico, is a Mexican citizen, and reports regularly on food activities near her home in Morelia. Lastly, there is Susana Trilling, author of *Seasons of My Heart,* who, while American, was heavily influenced by her Mexican grandmother and currently runs a cooking school in Oaxaca, Mexico.

So, which of these women has the most authority? Does Mexican heritage trump training? If so, how much? Where does immersion fit in along that scale? Does someone who is not Mexican, but has done extensive research and truly understands the culture, deserve as much respect as someone with Mexican heritage? Since I have no connection to this culture myself, I do not feel qualified to answer these questions with authority, although I do have my own opinions; I believe that a chef should be respected for his or her skill regardless of whether or not s/he has a personal connection to the type of food s/he cooks. However, I think that when such people claim to be an ultimate authority on that cooking, and thereby demean the value of the members of the culture they appropriate for personal gain, this is where the line is crossed.

To expand on this point, I think the idea of whether a chef or dish is truly authentic is one too complex for a single statement or hard-and-fast opinion to be sufficient; the best solution may be to simply take the question case by case. This conclusion is partially due to a reluctance on my part to make any firm assertions on the subject, lest I be considered hypocritical; however, from the different points of view, it's also clear that authenticity itself does not have a clear definition. One Mexican woman reserves her right to creativity within recipes but acknowledges that her more rigid peers may not see those creative dishes as "real" Mexican food; meanwhile, many members of the culinary world see Diana Kennedy's work as authentic. Neither of these views is necessarily right or wrong, although when making these judgment calls, it is important to keep in mind the idea of

appropriation and how easily a part of a culture or individual's identity can be hijacked by someone else, perhaps even without thinking.

Even though authenticity cannot be explicitly defined as a term, an important factor in determining authenticity seems to be having at least a fleeting knowledge of Mexican culinary history and the importance of food in Mexican culture. Acknowledging the roles of those who came before, particularly those from whom the cook learned his or her trade, is one way to avoid appropriation while designating the proper respect to the people who contributed to the food.

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